

TOP STORIES

Money for outfall pipe pursued

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Nassau County, state and federal officials say they're trying to find a new patchwork of financial sources to build an ocean outfall pipe at the county's superstorm Sandy-damaged Bay Park sewage treatment plant, while continuing to press the Federal Emergency Management Agency to reconsider its May refusal to fund it.

Policymakers have spent the summer trying to find the estimated \$690 million that it would take to send an average 50 million gallons a day of treated effluent into the Atlantic Ocean, instead of into the nutrient-choked Western Bays.

High levels of nitrogen in the effluent weaken the coastal marshlands in the area — key parts of the ecosystem that experts say also help protect the area from harsh waves and flooding during severe storms.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), who has been pushing

for the ocean outfall pipe, said FEMA could allocate money under its hazard mitigation grant program, or the state could use some of the nearly \$4.5 billion in federal Community Development Block Grant money it is receiving for Sandy recovery.

"I don't have any doubt the outfall pipe would be eligible for either of these," Schumer said.

Laura Phillips, executive director of FEMA's Sandy Recovery Office, wrote to the state on May 22 that the project was ineligible for public-assistance money because stringent nitrogen limits weren't in place when Sandy hit in October 2012.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation has said that the plant had long-standing violations of water quality before Sandy that the outfall pipe was to remedy, making the project suitable under FEMA's guidelines.

"I made that argument, but the lawyers at FEMA were unequivocal," Schumer said.

FEMA spokesman Michael Meenan said last week the decision was firm. "The matter stands as it did in May when the funding was denied," he said.

County spokesman Brian Nevin said the Nassau has been working with federal and state officials to find a funding solution, which could include other types of FEMA funds, the federal Community Development Block Grant money funded by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, or loans from the state's Environmental Facilities Corp., traditionally used for clean-water projects but recently tapped for \$256 million by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to build a new Tappan Zee bridge.

Jamie Rubin, director of Cuomo's Office of Storm Recovery, said his office met with FEMA about a month ago on the issue.

"We've made clear to FEMA that we expect them — as they told us they would — to continue to find a way to work with us and find a different answer than

they've already given us," Rubin said. "I think the ball is very much in their court."

But Rubin said while the "vast majority" of federal block-grant money will likely go to Long Island, it was unlikely any of that money could be directed to fully fund the ocean-outfall pipe.

"The first priority is always going to make sure people displaced from their homes have a place to go," he said.

While the county already has been awarded \$810 million in FEMA funds to rebuild the plant and is getting an additional \$150 million in federal CDBG money for a nitrogen-removal system, Carl LoBue, senior marine scientist with The Nature Conservancy on Long Island, said without an ocean outfall pipe, denitrification wouldn't be able to solve the problem due to the sheer volume of sewage coming from the plant into the Western Bays.

"Everyone wants the same thing," LoBue said. "We just need to figure out how to pay for it."